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A CRUCIFIXION

BY AMBROGIO LORENZETTI

ONE of the most valuable of the recent acquisitions of the Fogg Museum is a small panel, representing the Crucifixion, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (Figure 1), formerly in the collection of the late C. Fairfax Murray. The panel is in the form of a rectangle, surmounted by a pinnacle, and measures 24 inches (61 cm.) from base to apex and $11\frac{3}{8}$ inches (29 cm.) from side to side, both measurements exclusive of the enframing moulding which is an integral part of the panel.

The representation is an unusual combination of spirit and restraint. It challenges comparison with Ambrogio's *Deposition* in the great polyptych of the Academy at Siena (Figure 4), but is more restrained and more convincingly dramatic. The Saviour, flanked by two bewailing angels, hangs high upon the cross above the heads of the spectators. Below, the artist has placed a group of saints, spectators, and soldiers, bringing in all the actors in the tragedy without incoherence or any sense of crowding. The most striking group is that to the left of the cross, where Saint John, the Magdalen, the swooning Mary, and the two other Marys mentioned in the story of the Passion, are placed together with the greatest dramatic skill (Figure 2). The Beloved Disciple, dressed in a maroon-coloured robe, with clasped hands, is gazing down at the swooning Madonna.

Sienese art produced no more touching interpretation of the mystic relation of Saint John and the Mother imposed by the words of the Christ upon the cross. In counter action to Saint John, the Magdalen, who stands beside him, gazes up at the Christ. Her gesture, less florid than in the Academy Deposition, expresses abject sorrow, while her eyes send a message of the profoundest adoration. She is dressed in the conventional garment of flame-red cinnabar. The Madonna, dressed in a mantle of ultramarine blue, is supported by one of the Marys, while the other, her hands clasped against her cheek, links the three with the standing Magdalen. The power of Sienese line is perfectly shown in the expression of lifelessness which the artist has given the form of the Madonna. The underlying forms are stiffened, while the lines of the drapery are relaxed, making the figure the most pathetically expressive of the group. Above are other figures of mourners, soldiers, and spectators, conspicuous among them the youthful Longinus, on horseback in shining armour, a yellow mantle swung from the shoulder, and his right arm sweeping across his breast with a gesture of combined horror and awe. To the right of the cross is a group of soldiers, most conspicuous among them a bearded saint on a bay horse, probably conceived as Joseph of Arimathea. Above the spectators, against the gold background, are tossing scarlet banners with the S. P. Q. R. of the Empire in gold upon the folds. The general impression is that of the most animated movement, but without loss of dignity.

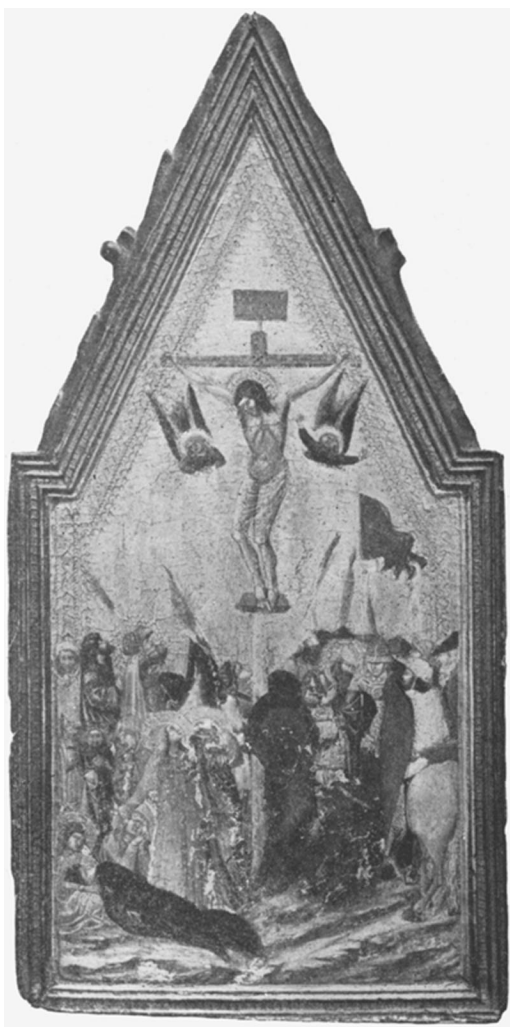


Figure 1

AMBROGIO LORENZETTI. CRUCIFIXION
FOGG ART MUSEUM

The panel is in an excellent state of preservation. When it first came to the Museum it was marred by a thick coat of hideous varnish which falsified the colours and turned the gold background to a dismal, banana-like yellow. A skilful restoration removed the defect and now the colours show undimmed brilliancy, while the background is an exquisite example of fourteenth century gilding. The cleaning revealed a number of spots from which the colour had come away altogether, but they are so small in area that they scarcely detract from the finished expression of the whole. Few examples in this country can give a truer idea of fourteenth century Sienese colour.

The attribution of the painting to Ambrogio, though a recent one, probably none will dispute. Mr. Murray considered it by Pietro Lorenzetti, but Mr. F. Mason Perkins, in an article in "Art in America" for August, 1920, restored it to its true author. It is hardly necessary to go into Morellian detail to support the attribution. As Mr. Perkins pointed out, the spirit of the work is that of the younger brother. Mr. Murray probably attributed the work to Pietro rather than Ambrogio on account of its dramatic quality. Pietro has always been considered more dramatic, but in reality he was more melodramatic. Pietro exaggerated dramatic action to a fault. One cannot but feel this in his frescoed representation of the Passion in the left transept of the Lower Church at Assisi. Ambrogio was far more restrained. He gives one something of that feeling of strength in reserve, so satisfactory to northern



Figure 2
AMBROGIO LORENZETTI. CRUCIFIXION (DETAIL)
FOGG ART MUSEUM



Figure 3
AMBROGIO LORENZETTI. CONCORD
PALAZZO PUBBLICO, SIENA

taste and one of the finest qualities of the Fogg Crucifixion. The action is even more dignified than in Ambrogio's undisputed Deposition in the Academy polyptych, producing an effect very different from that in any composition by Pietro.

Details and especially types fortify the impression received by the composition and action. The silhouettes are strongly reminiscent of those in the Presentation, formerly in the Belle Arti in Florence and now in the Uffizi (Figure 5), and the brilliant colour shows a clear relation between the two. The tricks of draughtsmanship, especially in the delineation of eyes and noses, are the same in the Fogg Crucifixion and in a number of undisputed works by Ambrogio. One needs but compare the head of the Magdalen, or that of the Mary who tends the Madonna, with the head of the figure of Concord in the Allegory of Good Government in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (Figure 3), or the Saint Dorothy in the Academy polyptych, to identify the author of the Fogg painting.

The approximate date of the panel, always an interesting point, is harder to determine. Ambrogio's chronology is especially difficult, but one fact is certain—the Fogg painting is a work of the artist's maturity. The forms are robust, the handling vigorous and sure. Above all, the composition and spiritual content indicate the work of a hand of experience and a mind developed by profound thought. The work can hardly antedate the Allegory of Good Government, and reminds one rather more of the Presentation in the Uffizi in Florence.



Figure 4
AMBROGIO LORENZETTI. POLYPTYCH
ACCADEMIA, SIENA



Figure 5
AMBROGIO LORENZETTI. PRESENTATION
UFFIZI, FLORENCE
(Alinari)

The date, therefore, may well be between the years 1337 and 1342. And thus the painting was done somewhat later than the other little panel by Ambrogio in the Museum, the pinnacle with Saint Agnes, which appears to have been painted somewhat before the Allegory of Good Government. The two paintings illustrate very happily the art of Ambrogio, and it is not too much to say that the Crucifixion is a real masterpiece, artistically, poetically, intellectually, of fourteenth century Italian art.